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Communications

OCLC Card Receipts

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The use of an on-line cataloging network like OCLC and the concomitant streamlining of book-processing activities do not always guarantee that library patrons will have quicker access through the catalog to these more quickly cataloged and processed materials. At the University of Hawaii we have discovered that the U.S. Postal Service can play a significant factor in determining when catalog cards get into the public catalog.

Since mid-June of 1979 when the University of Hawaii, Manoa, began participating in the OCLC network for cataloging and production of catalog cards, we have experienced an ongoing problem with consistent and predictable delivery of our catalog cards. Receipt statistics kept from June 14, 1979, through February 4, 1980, show that cataloging materials through the OCLC system and getting the materials on the shelves do not necessarily mean that patrons will be able to access the bibliographic records in a shorter period of time.

Figure 1 shows the average number of receipt days (i.e., the number of days between the time the box of cards is mailed from Columbus, Ohio, and the time the box is received at the University of Hawaii) sorted by month mailed and by postal type (first class or library rate). Table 1 presents the average number of days (plus the range from minimum to maximum number and standard deviation) for each month and number of observations (i.e., boxes received) without separation by postal type. Overall, an average of twenty-three days was required for receipt of cards by first-class mail and thirty-six days by library rate, an average for

both classes of twenty-six days for the entire seven-and-one-half-month period.

Initially, statistics on card receipts were begun to make sure that all produced cards were received. Originally all orders were arriving by standard library rate. It rapidly became clear, however, that the length of time it takes for library rate materials to arrive in Hawaii was unacceptable. We believed we could not function efficiently with the then consistent delays of four to eight weeks after mailing, which, with the time lag between production and mailing, was five to ten weeks after cataloging.

Materials began arriving first class in mid-July, and everything now is supposed to be coming first class. We have noticed since first-class delivery began that many boxes indeed are arriving in one to fourteen days—something that never happens with materials sent library rate. Many boxes continue to take four to eight weeks, however, with some first-class materials taking more than twelve weeks to arrive. The arrival range with first-class materials is considerably wider than with library rate materials, making it almost impossible to predict when catalog cards will arrive.

One possible reason for the wider divergence is the fact that OCLC standard boxes are stamped "library rate." Before OCLC sends cards to Hawaii the "library-rate" stamp is crossed off and "first class" is written on the boxes. First-class postage is affixed. It seems probable that the post office does not always recognize the first class correction, and many of the boxes continue to come library rate (which seems to be low-priority surface mail on slow boats).

The designation L for library rate in figure 1 is applied only to those boxes which did not have "first class" stamped on them, although in reality many of the first-class

Table 1. Average Number of Days Required for Delivery (First Class and Library Rate Combined) of Catalog Cards from OCLC at the University of Hawaii

MONTH	AVERAGE NUMBER OF DAYS	RANGE		STANDARD DEVIATION	NUMBER OF OBSERVATIONS
		MINIMUM	MAXIMUM		
June 1979	44.50	33	54	6.92	6
July 1979	23.55	3	43	12.12	22
August 1979	21.40	2	41	14.42	25
September 1979	34.37	3	87	25.02	19
October 1979	25.36	1	52	17.98	25
November 1979	31.82	1	58	16.03	34
December 1979	26.81	3	53	15.70	21
January 1980	12.81	2	33	9.14	21

boxes probably also came surface mail. This conjecture doesn't account for the fact that genuine library-rate receipts have never taken as long as some of the longest first-class receipts. An easy answer, or even any consistent pattern, has been impossible to establish.

We realize these statistics will probably not have a significant impact on the practices of the U.S. Postal Service, and there may be a variety of reasons for the unpredictable and often interminable delays in mail delivery. We do want to provide facts and figures to state and federal officials, however. Although complaints of inconsistent mail delivery are routinely heard, very little data have been gathered to substantiate these complaints. Copies of our receipt figures have been forwarded to various state and federal officials in the hopes of at least bringing the problem to the attention of the proper authorities. We hope that something can be done in the future.

The figures also provide a graphic example of some of the overlooked problems associated with using a high-technology network to produce an archaic bibliographic format like the catalog card. We have been able to streamline our cataloging and processing activities because of technology and are able to process a greater number of materials with more speed and consistency. The patron's main access point, the card catalog, has not been able to keep up with this trend, however, because of such uncontrollable factors as the length of time required for mail delivery.

As long as we rely on the generation of cards or fiche or paper for our public catalogs, these kinds of external factors will continue to hamper the provision of timely service. Here in Hawaii, we can only hope that a practical on-line catalog is not too far in the future.

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